

The Contribution of Norwegian Baptists towards Religious Freedom in Norway, 1877–1891

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Baptists have played an important role in the discourse on religious freedom from the time of their emergence in Britain in the seventeenth century. Since then, their advocacy for religious freedom has been climacteric in other contexts beyond the shores of Great Britain. As a result, the arrival of Baptists to a conformist Lutheran state church context in nineteenth-century Norway posed a challenge to the prevalent religious homogeneity in the society and championed the debate on religious liberty for non-Lutherans. My article therefore draws attention to the journey of the Baptists in accomplishing the goal of extensive religious liberty in Norway and the processes involved within that. This article focuses particularly on the years 1877–1891, illustrating how controversies arose due to the disapproval of Baptists towards religious coercion and discrimination during that period, the legislative aftermath of this and the law which became a part of their witness for justice and religious equity in the late nineteenth century.

Keywords

Norwegian Baptists; religious freedom; Baptist history

Introduction

The aim of this article is to investigate the ways Norwegian Baptists expressed their convictions of religious liberty within the constraints of religious conformism in the period from 1877–1891. The analysis focuses on the dissatisfaction of Baptists with the supposition of the Dissenter Law that freedom of religion was a concession not an inherent right, and examines the efforts of Baptists to address legislative deterrence through their advocacy for reforms within this period. While the main objective of this account is to narrate ways through which Norwegian Baptists reflected their convictions of religious freedom amidst conflicts with the religious and political establishment, a subsidiary interest is to employ this account to remind Baptists of the power of their convictions in a secular and pluralistic society in the twenty-first century in which church and state relations and issues around religious freedom are ongoing. In order to better understand the nature and significance of this Baptist contribution to Norwegian religious liberty, we begin by setting the historical context in which the Dissenter Law arose.

The Erastian Model in Protestant Norway

Reformation of the church was introduced to Norway by the decision of Christian III in 1536. Unlike Germany, where the Reformation reflected a crescendo of social, political and religious dissatisfaction, the Reformation in Norway was legislated into effect, imposed upon the people by royal decree. This ended the relative independence from the state that the church had enjoyed under the Roman Catholic church framework and initiated the state church system.¹ The emergence of a nation state in Norway (under the Danish crown) ensured that alongside the religious function of the state church, the church also served as a civic arm to the crown.² This blurred the lines between the political and religious establishments as both functioned as institutions under the disposition of the king. Gradually, the crown's authority extended into the piety of its subjects, using royal influence to compel religious uniformity as a tool for governance.

For the next 160 years, from the enactment of the Royal Absolutism Act until the introduction of the Dissenter Law in 1845, the national identity of Norway seems to have been inseparable from its Lutheran heritage. The amalgamation of church and state configured the character of the nation, forming the basis of its social coherence. For example, the baptism of infants in the Lutheran faith conferred upon them both membership in the state church and their citizenship. Also, civic rights were dependent on the confirmation status of young people.³ Community was also formed around the church. Church services were essential and mandatory as the church was an arena the crown utilised to maintain social control over its citizens.⁴ This merger was very visible in society through the church acting as an agent of the crown to ensure that citizens complied with royal decrees. The state-church framework and its civic function seemed to have replaced the evangelical mission of the church. In due course, the state church monopolised religion, making preaching of the gospel by non-clergy unlawful.⁵ At this point, religion in Norway was homogeneous and political, making the realm strictly Lutheran.⁶

¹ Anne-Louise Eriksson, Göran Gunner and Niclas Blåde, eds., *Exploring a Heritage: Evangelical Lutheran Churches in the North* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), p. 308.

² Øystein Rian, 'Historie i Tvangstrøye Kongemakt Og Historieformidling i Danmark-Norge 1536–1814', *Historisk Tidsskrift* 92 (2013): pp. 63-89 (p. 71); Andreas Aarflot, *Kirke Og Stat i Norge: Fra Reformasjonen til Våre Dager* (Oslo: Nomi Forlag, 1969), p. 75.

³ Frederick Hale, 'The Norwegian Baptist Quest for Toleration', *Foundations* 22, no. 4 (October 1979): 293-305 (p. 294).

⁴ Leslie Standard Hunter, ed., *Scandinavian churches: The Development and Life of the Churches of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1965), p. 40.

⁵ Hunter, *Scandinavian churches*, p. 40.

⁶ W. Cole Durham, Tore Sam Lindholm, and Bahia Tahziblie, eds., *Facilitating Freedom of Religion or Belief: A Deskbook* (Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 2004), p. 778.

The exclusivity of the church was not without its internal controversies. The eighteenth century ushered in an era of increasing fracturing within the wider reformation movement that saw various groupings, pietistic, and lay movements arise within the Lutheran establishment. The 1740s saw the arrival of the Moravians in Norway, a group from Herrnhut with a renewal vision for church and a missional drive,⁷ who quickly positioned themselves within the religious establishment as a spiritual alternative to what the state church had to offer the populace. Andreas Aarflot comments that that a key objection of the Moravians was to the ‘calculated’ religion of the state and the oversight of the crown upon the religious piety of the nation.⁸

Moravian pietists considered the dependency of faith on the civil authorities to be a constraint to true piety. Consequently, they challenged the religious establishment by advocating for a religious experience that was convictional not legislative.⁹ In doing so, Moravians aimed to affirm the free will of individuals to choose or reject God.¹⁰ This was exemplified within the communities (*Brødresamfunn*) they formed within the state-church structure. Their actions were perceived as radical and illicit by the political and religious authorities, who regarded their activities a disruption to social and religious cohesion.¹¹ Despite their influence being limited by the Conventicle Article (*Konventikkelplakaten*, 1741), and their meetings having to be supervised by clergy of the state church, the Moravians left an impact on religion in Norway, paving the way for groups with separatist ideas who made religious freedom an important facet of their identity.¹²

The Moravian movement was succeeded by indigenous pietistic groups such as Haugeism, led by Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771–1824). His most significant contribution to Norway was probably his confrontation with the censorship and restrictions of the religious and political establishment. Hauge taught against the calculated religion of the state, calling church members to radical faith, which was characterised by conviction, regeneration and character.¹³ These convictions translated into a quest for social and economic liberation. According to Inger Furseth, Hauge loathed

⁷ Ian Randall, ‘Early Moravian Spirituality and Missionary Vision’, *Wesley and Methodist Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2017): 123-140, (pp. 125-136).

⁸ Aarflot, *Kirke Og Stat i Norge*, p. 100.

⁹ Mark A. Granquist, *Scandinavian Pietists: Spiritual Writings from 19th Century Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland* (New York: Paulist Press, 2015), p. 6.

¹⁰ Peder Eidberg, *Det Folk som Kalles Baptister: En undersøkelse av Det Norske Baptistsamfunns bagrunn, tilblivelse, historie og egenart frem til jubiléet i 1902* (Stabekk: Norsk Litteraturselskap, 2003), p. 21.

¹¹ Gina Dahl, *Book Collections of Clerics in Norway, 1650-1750* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), p. 10.

¹² Inger Furseth, *A Comparative Study of Social and Religious Movements in Norway, 1780s-1905*, vol. 7 (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), pp. 79-80.

¹³ Clara Sariva, Peter Jan Margry, Lionel Obadia, Kinga Povedak and José Mapril, eds., *Experiencing Religion: New Approaches to Personal Religiosity* (Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2016), p. 224.

the monopolies of civil servants and the burghers, and both the church and its clergy fell within this category.¹⁴

The most significant contribution of Moravian and Haugean pietism was their plausible effort to challenge the influence of the crown on matters regarding freedom. Notwithstanding, religious freedom was still conceived to exist only within the boundaries of Lutheranism. For example, the followers of Hauge supported the existing church order, while advocating for extensive freedom for lay activities within its framework.¹⁵ Taking into account this existing paradigm, it is no surprise that when Norway's constitution was written in 1814, it re-enforced these prevailing religious positions, as noted in paragraph 2 of the constitution:

The Evangelical-Lutheran religion remains the public religion of the State. Those inhabitants, who confess thereto, are bound to raise their children to the same. Jesuits and monastic orders are not permitted. Jews are still prohibited from entry to the Realm.¹⁶

Liselotte Malmgart underlines how an inversion transpired as a result of constitutional support for religious homogeneity. The constitution intended to secure the prerogative of freedom, equality, the people's interest and the rule of law to those it presided over. However, at the same time it endorsed religious tyranny by explicitly prohibiting its citizens from participating in all religious practices outside of that which it provided.¹⁷ This preserved the Erastian approach to religion.¹⁸

The Dissenter Law and First Steps towards Religious Equality

However, the return of Norwegian returnees from around Europe after the Napoleonic wars of the early to mid-1800s, brought new religious ideas to Norway, prompting a gradual process of change. This began with the instrumental involvement of these groupings in the revocation of the Conventicle Articles in 1842, which enabled lay groups within the state church to organise themselves without legal repercussions. In addition, Quakers demanded validation for marriages that they performed, exemption from compulsory baptism and rights to exercise their beliefs without harassment.¹⁹ Lastly, there was a campaign for the right of Jews to be

¹⁴ Furseth, *A Comparative Study of Social and Religious Movements in Norway*, p. 81.

¹⁵ Lars P. Qualben, *A History of the Christian Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), p. 398.

¹⁶ Keith Robbins, ed., *Political and Legal Perspectives: The Dynamics of Religious Reforms in Northern Europe, 1780-1920* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010), p. 210.

¹⁷ Karsten Alnæs, *Miraklenes år* (Oslo: Schibsted Forlag, 2013), pp. 266-274.

¹⁸ Robbins, *Political and Legal Perspectives*, p. 210.

¹⁹ Theodore C. Blegen, *Norwegian Migration to America 1825-1860* (New York: Haskell House, 1969), p. 35.

admitted into Norway, calling out the political establishment for religious discrimination against this group of people.²⁰

Consequently, in 1845 the Norwegian Parliament passed the Dissenter Law which allowed Norwegians, for the first time, to belong to dissenter groups without legal and religious implications.²¹ This did not relinquish the influence of the Lutheran state church. Birth registrations, marriages, deaths and burials continued to be functions of the state church, as well as religious education in schools. The Dissenter Law was a step in the direction of religious equality and freedom, but with limited resulting improvements. Full freedom to exercise religious convictions that differed from the Lutheran state church was still a distant reality. However, the Dissenter Law did play an important role in religious life outside of the Lutheran establishment. Initially, the legislation made it possible for Norwegian citizens to withdraw from the state church and adhere to free church. The law sought to protect members of dissenter communities from discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation, at the same time allowing the interests of the state to be maintained, as suggested in article 18 ‘no religious confession shall be exempted from conscription’.²²

Peder Eidberg, a Norwegian Baptist historian, notes that from the time of their emergence in the late 1850s, Baptists and other free churches in Norway initially displayed a positive attitude towards the Dissenter Law.²³ However, starting from the 1870s, it became apparent that objection to the legislation was rising due to a discriminatory tendency which was disguised in the legislation.²⁴ This concern aimed to highlight the paradox of the law, which stated that the differences in religious affiliation shall ‘not justify any differences in expectations in regard to [citizenry] duties and rights’.²⁵ Nevertheless, as supported by records of harassment and oppression towards dissenters, an institutional attempt to restrain the progress of nonconformist activities was embedded in the application of this legislation. In practice, in relations with the state and as citizens of the Norwegian society they were expected to fulfil their duties, but often hindered in practising their rights.

²⁰ Anthony Lerman, ed., *Jewish Communities of the World: A Contemporary Guide* (London: MacMillan, 1989), p. 115.

²¹ Edith L. Blumhofer and Randall Balmer, *Modern Christian Revivals* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 105.

²² Knut Rygnestad, *Dissentarspørsmålet i Noreg frå 1845-1891. Lovgjeving og administrativ praksis* (Oslo: Lutherstiftelsen, 1955), p. 16.

²³ Eidberg, *Det Folk som Kalles Baptister*, pp. 227-232.

²⁴ Hale, ‘The Norwegian Baptist Quest for Toleration’, pp. 228-231.

²⁵ Knut Rygnestad, *Dissentarspørsmålet i Noreg frå 1845-1891*, p. 6.

A Closer Look: Baptists and the Dissenter Law

Amongst those who began to return to Europe during the mid-1800s were Scandinavians who had been living in the United States and now came with new religious affiliations, including the Baptist faith. Amongst these returnees was Fredrik Rymker (1819-1884), a Danish seaman who had been converted, baptised and commissioned by American Baptists. Following a short-lived missionary attempt by Enoch Svee (1816-1843) in 1842, Rymker moved to Norway in 1857 with the purpose of bringing the Baptist message to Norway.²⁶ At the heart of this message were the convictions that the Christian church should be comprised of regenerated souls (demonstrated in believer's baptism), who voluntarily choose to serve the Lord, and the independence of the church from the state.²⁷ By 1858 Rymker had gathered about eight followers, whom he baptised, and formed the first Baptist congregation in Norway. Among them was an eighteen-year-old boy by the name Carl Gundersen Kongerød whose baptism immediately brought the fledgling congregation into opposition with the Dissenter Law. Paragraph 15 of the Dissenter Law of 1845 stated that the age of religious consent was nineteen and so Kongerød's baptism was not recognised.

The restrictions on baptism and voluntary membership (regardless of age limit) which the Dissenter Law represented were brought up in 1877 during the inauguration of the Norwegian Baptist Union and subsequent gatherings. Baptists inquired within themselves about complying with the legislation considering the challenge it posed to aspects of their faith.²⁸ At first, opinion was broadly divided into two camps: one group for adhering to the law and its requirements in spite of the challenges it posed to baptism and church membership, while another recommended non-compliance.²⁹ Yet the differences in views as to how to respond to the law did not change their general consensus regarding the law's constraints upon their convictions.³⁰ This was evident in the editorial of the Union's periodical in 1881:

Freedom of religion is the mother of all other true freedom [...] when the spirit of persecution is embodied by the magistrate, it wraps the world in a *Seculum Obscurum* [...] Christianity without freedom of religion is like a giant prison, a society bound by the ropes of the Philistines. It can for a while be used by the world's political powers as a harp player, but the time comes when it will catch the "temple's pillars". Then the whole building will fall into ruins.³¹

²⁶ Hale, 'The Norwegian Baptist Quest for Toleration', p. 295.

²⁷ J. M. Sellevold, *Baptistene i Norge: Historisk Oversigt samt Jubilæumskonferensen i Skien 1902* (Kristiania: Norsk Litteraturselskabs Forlag, 1902), p. 12.

²⁸ Blumhofer and Balmer, *Modern Christian Revivals*, pp. 105-106.

²⁹ Forhandling fra De norske Baptisters første almindelige Konference i Bergen den 6te, 7de og 8de Juli 1877 (Bergen: N. Nilssens Bogtrykkeri, 1877), pp. 3-5.

³⁰ *Unions-Banneret*, Fredrikshald, May 1881, pp. 38-39.

³¹ *Unions-Banneret*, March 1883.

Norwegian Baptists began finding ways to communicate their dissatisfaction that laid the grounds for what was to become an important campaign by the Baptist movement; a campaign that included both civil disobedience and direct engagement with the government and led to significant amendments to the Dissenter Law in 1890. The next section takes a deeper look at how this process unfolded and explores the nature of the Baptist contribution to the cause of religious freedom.

Baptist Response to the Dissenter Law

Starting with civil disobedience,³² Norwegian Baptists contended that the law and the authorities failed to protect their civil rights such as the freedom of expression. This was articulated by Fredrik Nilsen (1847–1931), who was caught in a controversy with the authorities concerning the baptism of two minors, which resulted in his incarceration. In a letter he wrote from his prison cell, Nilsen expressed the implications of his action for the Baptist Union, urging them not to relent. He explained that non-compliance exposed the lack of individual choice in relation to faith, illustrating the paradox of the Dissenter Law. Such disapproval towards religious coercion as Nilsen displayed affirmed an aspect of Baptist convictions, namely, the inherent freedom of each human.

In addition to civil disobedience, Norwegian Baptists employed another method in their disputation with the authorities. They began to engage the government in a direct campaign for religious freedom. This was evident in a number of correspondences within the period 1880–1891, particularly the communication between J. M. Sjødahl (1851–1939), on behalf of the Baptist Union, and Johan Sverdrup, Prime Minister and leader of the political left-wing in 1883. In his letter, Sjødahl carefully set out the essence of the hindrances that had stood in the way of dissenter communities. He brought to attention the implications of withdrawing one's membership from the state church and how it exposed the law's exploitation of certain aspects of their civil rights. He explained to Sverdrup that 'the question regarding withdrawal from the state church is without doubt primarily an issue of power. The current paragraph, which had the age of consent at 19 years, has caused many difficulties.'³³ To avoid such contention over this, Sjødahl suggested that both the age of consent and the process of withdrawal of church membership should be re-examined. He wrote:

Anyone who goes to the priest in their parish and notifies by writing in the ministerial book that he wishes to step out of the state church, is considered to be

³² Furseth, *A Comparative Study of Social and Religious Movements in Norway*, p. 187.

³³ Forhandling fra De norske Baptisters første almindelige Konference i Bergen, pp. 3-5; and Forhandling fra De norske Baptisters sjette Konferanse i Fredrikshald, pp. 8-9.

out. Likewise, with any who has already become a member of a dissenter society. In this way having become a member of a dissenter church, the church should have the task to report to the parish priest within a month [...] No one should without permission from their parents or guardian withdraw their membership from the state church before they have reached the age of 15.³⁴

The suggestions brought by Sjødahl also underline the obstacles of the law which, without finding a solution, would continue to create issues that would act as hindrances to achieving religious liberty. He outlined the legislative mandate to control religious convictions and the age of consent as represented in the functions assigned to the clergy of the Lutheran state church. Notwithstanding, Sjødahl accentuated that the resolve of Baptists in confronting the law, despite opposition, was to create a society that was free and fair. This he emphasised as being integral to the conviction of Baptists.³⁵ Sjødahl's correspondence with the Prime Minister in 1883, and to the parliament in 1886, highlighted the need for a legislative action on certain aspects of the Dissenter Law. Baptists brought attention to two issues in these correspondences. Firstly, the age of consent, which was put at nineteen years, which limited individual liberty, needed to be lowered to fifteen. Secondly, Baptists also made a resolution that a free society was dependent on the government's willingness to relinquish their control over religious matters in general, or in regulating religious participation in particular.³⁶ Without addressing these constituents, the religious restraint would not be addressed, which in turn would continue to perpetuate inequity.

The advocacy approach of Norwegian Baptists did not go unacknowledged. They were met with responses from Prime Minister Sverdrup and the Justice Department. The Prime Minister expressed empathy with Norwegian Baptists for their predicament, acknowledging that the Dissenter Law required amendment. However, Sverdrup felt unable to promise immediate concession to their demands, warning that although the changes suggested were vital, the process required time.³⁷ The Department of Justice, on the other hand, demonstrated more resistance to these recommendations based on 'lack of evidence' that the current legal arrangement was detrimental to Baptist convictions and practices.³⁸ A reply from the department in 1884 read as follows:

The department cannot recommend that such dispensation be granted to an undefined group of people who, without having any official relationship with the state, regard themselves as constituting a congregation, even though it has never

³⁴ Forhandling fra De norske Baptisters sjette Konferanse i Fredrikshald, pp. 8-10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-10.

³⁶ Norwegian Parliament Archive, Storthings Forhandlinger 1886, Dokument No. 11: Forslag Fra Baptistsamfundet til Lov angaaende forandring i Dissenterloven af 16de Juli 1845, pp. 2-3.

³⁷ Forhandling fra De norske Baptisters sjette Konferanse i Fredrikshald den 22de og 23de Juni 1883, p. 10.

³⁸ Forhandling fra De norske Baptisters sjette Konferanse i Fredrikshald den 22de og 23de Juni 1883, pp. 6-7.

been organised and recognised as such in accordance with Paragraph Two of the Dissenter Law.³⁹

Frederick Hale suggests that rather than putting an end to the controversy, this response ensured that it continued throughout the 1880s. It also served to intensify the Baptist effort to find a way of making progress. The following section explores their contribution particularly with respect to this phase of the campaign for religious liberty.⁴⁰

The Contributions of Norwegian Baptists to the Cause of Religious Freedom

Norwegian Baptists of the nineteenth century held the conviction that freedom to preside over their own beliefs was an innate gift bestowed upon each individual. This opposed the religious conventionalities in Norway which conferred the fullness of this principle only to members of the state religion. Their disapproval of the establishment's application of the Dissenter Law was expressed in both written form and through non-compliance, both aimed at highlighting the biases it endorsed. In due course, after attempts by Baptists to bring to attention the prejudice of the law's prerogative, the political authorities responded with sympathy but not, however, with any tangible action to resolve its intolerance.⁴¹

This unresponsiveness did not deter Norwegian Baptists from re-appealing their case over and over again. In the second half of this decade, between 1886 and 1888, the Baptist Union intensified its actions to promote the awareness of the necessity of religious freedom for minorities. Most notable was the 'Proposal from the Baptist Union regarding the Legislative Reforms relating to the Dissenter Law of 16 July 1845' in 1886.⁴² In this, the Baptist community pointed out to the authorities that 'freedom of faith and religion has the power over human kind, that it births in the heart love for other forms of freedom, and what is more, it makes humans fit to use their freedom in the right way'.⁴³ In consequence, Baptists were implying that a

³⁹ Forhandling fra De norske Baptisters syvende almindelige Konferanse i Skien den 11te og 12te Juli 1884 (Fredrikshald: Halden Trykkeri, 1884), p. 9.

⁴⁰ Hale, 'The Norwegian Baptist Quest for Toleration', p. 300.

⁴¹ The description of the engagement of Norwegian Baptists can already be found in the records of their first conference in 1877, the year the Norwegian Baptist Union was established. This was continued in the years that followed. See Forhandling fra De norske Baptisters første almindelige Konference i Bergen, pp. 3-5; Forhandling fra De norske Baptisters sjette Konferanse i Fredrikshald, pp. 8-10; and Eidberg, *Det Folk som Kalles Baptister*, pp. 222-244.

⁴² Norwegian Parliament Archive, Storthings Forhandlinger 1886, Dokument No. 11: Forslag Fra Baptistsamfundet til Lov angaaende forandring i Dissenterloven af 16de Juli 1845, pp. 1-3; and Storthings Forhandlinger 1887, Dokument No. 22: fra Kirkekomiteen. Forslag til forandringer i Dissenterloven, pp., 1-6.

⁴³ Norwegian Parliament Archive, Forslag Fra Baptistsamfundet til Lov angaaende forandring i Dissenterloven af 16de Juli 1845, p. 1.

neglect or an intentional attempt to undermine religious liberty for dissenters jeopardised the indemnity of the law to those under its jurisdiction.

The inseparability between other civil rights and religious liberty formed much of the ground of reasoning of Norwegian Baptists, although its essence found its entity in their theological framework.⁴⁴ The conclusion at which they arrived was that a violation of one civil right is a violation of all civil rights, whether or not it is related to religious convictions. In terms of the Dissenter Law, the Baptists, along with other dissenter groups such as the Methodists, thus focused their argument around what they saw as its paradoxical nature — claiming to grant liberty to non-Lutherans, whilst failing to do exactly this.⁴⁵ Baptists for example, stated that ‘if the law then authorizes freedom of expression of faith, then it provides this without restriction which can then be expressed not only in freedom of religious expression but also in other civil rights’.⁴⁶ There should be no distinctions made as to what civil entitlements applied to whom when all were equally included within the remit of the law.⁴⁷

To address this paradox, Baptists outlined three legislative reforms that the government could not ignore. Firstly, concerning the age of consent for leaving the Lutheran state church or joining a dissenter church, which was set at nineteen years. Baptists noted two particular issues with regard to this: the law’s infringement on the conscience of those who had an interest in joining dissenter communities and of those who assisted them,⁴⁸ with jail sentences, fines or both as consequences for ignoring the law; and the bias of the law toward members of the state church whose membership conditions did not correspond with the age-limit requirement.⁴⁹ Norwegian Baptists therefore strongly emphasised how this clause gave continued legal backing to prejudice towards dissenters. What ensued from this, they underlined, was inequality and legislative harassment to law-abiding citizens, which in turn weakened their confidence in the law for the protection of their inherent right to free thought.⁵⁰ The solution to their plight, they suggested, was a resolution to lower the age limit.⁵¹

⁴⁴ *Unions-Banneret*, Fredrikshald, May 1881, pp. 38-39 and *Unions-Banneret*, March 1883.

⁴⁵ Arne Hassing, *Religion and Power: The Case of Methodism in Norway* (North Carolina: The Mountaineer, 1980), p. 133.

⁴⁶ Norwegian Parliament Archive, Forslag Fra Baptistsamfundet til Lov angaaende forandring i Dissenterloven af 16de Juli 1845, p. 1.

⁴⁷ Norwegian Parliament Archive, Forslag til forandringer i Dissenterloven, p. 1.

⁴⁸ Norwegian Parliament Archive, Forslag fra Baptistsumfundet til lov angaaende forandring i Dissenterloven, p.1; and Forhandling fra De norske Baptisters sjette Konferanse i Fredrikshald, p. 9.

⁴⁹ Norwegian Parliament Archive, Forslag Fra Baptistsamfundet til Lov angaaende forandring i Dissenterloven af 16de Juli 1845, p. 2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵¹ Forhandling fra De norske Baptisters sjette Konferanse i Fredrikshald, pp. 8-10; and Norwegian Parliament Archive, Forslag til Forandringer i Dissenterloven, p. 1.

A second issue which the Baptist Union brought to attention was the role of the clergy of the state church with regard to dissenters. The Dissenter Law assigned local parish priests as those responsible for the process of cancelling membership from the Lutheran state church. But what this legislation did not take into consideration, argued the Norwegian Baptists, were a number of challenges linked to this procedure. At the outset was the problem of proximity, or rather inaccessibility, to a parish priest due to distance. Baptists noted the remoteness of some communities to the local parish. Accessing this service therefore also meant an additional financial expense related to travel which persons intending to withdraw their membership were expected to bear. Still on the issue of proximity, even if these parishes were reachable, Baptists argued that in some cases, physical factors such as age were a real restriction on being able to comply with this. The walking distance could, for example, stand in the way of the elderly in this process. In a nutshell, the Baptist Union sought to reiterate that no citizen should be hindered from expressing their religious belief for such auxiliary reasons.

Consequently, they called upon the nation's lawmakers to stand up for genuine liberty, which, in the first place, should be the intent of the law. They asserted that

it cannot be overlooked, that there is not freedom of religion as long as one's religious expression is tied to a condition of the civil law. Freedom of religion requires, it seems to us, that anyone can freely and without hindrance follow their convictions in action (of course as long as their actions do not contradict other entitlements of the law or co-citizens' interests).⁵²

Rather than the prerogatives of the law being applicable to only a few who are in good health, financially buoyant or have access to the local parish priest, Norwegian Baptists suggested an amendment. They proposed that the role of the clergy of the Lutheran state church in this process should be re-considered, perhaps the law should rather make 'personal visitation' to the local parish priest, as required by the law in connection to membership withdrawal, a matter of choice.⁵³

Third and lastly, the Baptist Union challenged the general notion that the political authorities had the power to preside over religious matters. They made reference to the coercion that emerged due to the role of the government as an accreditation agency for dissenter churches as stated in paragraph 2 of the Dissenter Law.⁵⁴ This position, they pointed out, gave the state tight control over the practices and organisation of all religious

⁵² Norwegian Parliament Archive, Forslag Fra Baptistsamfundet til Lov angaaende forandring i Dissenterloven af 16de Juli 1845, p. 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Knut Rygnestad, *Dissentarspørsmålet i Noreg frå 1845-1891*, p. 13.

activities. Concretely, this was illustrated in the government's attempt to control their choice of pastors and leaders,⁵⁵ galvanising mistrust among dissenters. The Baptists indicated their uncertainty over adhering to the criteria of the law without considering if and how it eroded their convictions. It is important to note that in their appeal they stressed that they recognised the principle behind the state's interest in maintaining control over religious matters, however they 'cannot for the sake of conscience for that reason fulfill the law of this paragraph'.⁵⁶ Their objection to the demand of the authorities did not translate to refraining from cooperation with the authorities. On the contrary, there was a willingness to collaborate with the government as long as the government was willing to give up its agenda to coerce non-Lutherans or relegate them to the status of being second-class citizens.⁵⁷

This compromise by the Norwegian Baptists was reiterated, more or less, in subsequent appeals such as the 'Proposal for amendments in the Dissenter Law in 1887' and the 'Recommendation of the Church Committee in regard to different private Amendments to the Dissenter Law of 16th July 1845' among others. The nature of their proposal remained: the first step in resolving the violation of the rights of non-Lutherans to express their religious convictions was to amend the law. Paragraphs 2 and 15 of the Dissenter Law, which had been highlighted as the essence of the contention between Baptists and the authorities, particularly needed to be revised. Accordingly, the Baptists presented the authorities with some suggestions for reforms, starting with the following regarding paragraph 2 of the Dissenter Law: 'When priests or pastors, referred to in the preceding paragraph have demonstrated that they have been approved by the civil authorities [...] they have the right to lead protocols as section 2 of the Dissenter Law of 1845.'⁵⁸

'Proposal for amendments in the Dissenter Law' in 1887 elaborated a number of ways to go about these revisions. First, they emphasised the importance of the government embracing without hesitation the choice of ministers made by dissenter churches. This was followed by the need not only to acknowledge their ministers but to confer upon them the function of notaries, giving them the dispensation to attend to matters regarding the withdrawal of membership from the Lutheran state church.⁵⁹ In addition to requesting recognition of their ministers, Norwegian Baptists urged the

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

⁵⁶ Norwegian Parliament Archive, Forslag Fra Baptistsamfundet til Lov angaaende forandring i Dissenterloven af 16de Juli 1845, p. 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

⁵⁸ Norwegian Parliament Archive, Forslag fra Baptistsumfundet til lov angaaende forandring i Dissenterloven, p. 3.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

authorities to lower the age restriction for any withdrawal of membership from that stated in paragraph 15. In encouraging this motion, they made the suggestion that ‘no one should be acknowledged as withdrawn from the state church until they have reached the age of 15. But individual cases of exceptions regarding age shall be decided by the king.’⁶⁰ Norwegian Baptists argued, supported by substantial evidence such as the account of the persecution they had suffered in their movement, that a good resolution would benefit both sides.⁶¹ Which more specifically for them, would mean no more fines or incarcerations, as had been the experience for most of this decade.⁶²

With these arguments and the presentation of such evidence, Baptists hoped to galvanise the political will to address discrimination against non-Lutherans and the infringement of their religious rights.⁶³ Their efforts were rewarded: 29 June 1888 marked a new dawn in this discourse with a positive reply from the government to Baptists. The sudden response from the state gave a glimpse of hope to Baptists and other dissenter groups that things were going their way. The authorities had come to a place of acceptance concerning the role of the law in upholding inequity towards religious minority groups, namely non-Lutherans. The authorities’ response stated that this affliction ‘cannot and should not be allowed to continue in a civilized society and amends must be made at once for such conditions’.⁶⁴ There was a political will to prioritise amendments relating to the age of consent and an official approval of dissenter ministers, along with interest from the political establishment to bestow upon dissenter ministers the powers of a public notary in order to validate their report or approval of births, baptisms, deaths, marriages and transfers of membership.⁶⁵ This news was welcomed with joy and applause by Norwegian Baptists.⁶⁶

In the proceedings ‘Draft Regarding the Law on Dissenters’ in 1890, the authorities came to terms with some of the limits of the law on non-

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1

⁶¹ Forhandling fra De norske Baptisters tiende almindelige Konference i Arendal den 5te-7de Juli, 33-34.

⁶² Hale’s article provides a list of dissenters who faced fines and imprisonment for breaking the Dissenter Law as submitted by the Baptist Union in 1888. These examples included Abraham Grimstvedt, a clerk from Kristiansand, fined 60 crowns (including court costs) in 1883, 60 crowns in 1885, 150 crowns in 1886, and 150 crowns in 1887; Johannes Olsen, a stonemason from Fredrikstad, jailed for five days on bread and water in July 1887; and, Oluf Mikalsen, a preacher from Moss, jailed for three days on bread and water in April in Fredrikshald, four days in July in Moss, and seven days in Tønsberg, all in 1887. Their offences included baptisms or giving communion to members of the Lutheran state church. See Hale, ‘The Norwegian Baptist Quest for Toleration’, p. 301.

⁶³ Norwegian Parliament Archive, Forslag fra Baptistsumfundet til lov angaaende forandring i Dissenterloven, p. 3.

⁶⁴ Hale, ‘The Norwegian Baptist Quest for Toleration’, p. 301.

⁶⁵ Norwegian Parliament Archive, Storthings Forhandling 1886. Dokument No. 11: Om Udfærdigelse af en lov angaaende dissentere (1890), pp. 1-83 (pp. 6-7).

⁶⁶ Forhandling fra De norske Baptisters tiende almindelige Konference i Arendal den 5te-7de Juli 1888, pp. 33-34.

Lutheran citizens. This realisation confirmed the law's disingenuous propensity to claim to guarantee freedom for dissenters to exercise their faith while substantiating systematic oppression against them.⁶⁷ To correct this misdeed, in 1890 the parliamentary assembly laid out the following motion:⁶⁸

- a. Apart from personal contributions to the State church and its clergy, the dissenters are exempted from personal municipality contributions to the public school when they have a commensurate school approved by the school commission.
- b. They are exempted from notifying the civil authorities before they use a building for service.
- c. Dissenters do not have to notify births and deaths to the parish priest, but only to their own church priest or pastor as long as they belong to approved congregations.
- d. Regarding the petition, the king can give an approved dissenter congregations' priest the right to marriage between two dissenters.
- e. The age limit for membership and for leaving the state church is set at the age of 18.
- f. While the present law only decides that legal representation (*Ombud*) or orders in the state church could not be transferred to dissenters, the proposal will be that dissenters, with the exception of certain subjects, also should not be able to be hired as teachers in the public school, and they should also be exempted from municipal proceedings and decisions concerning the state church and public school.

The council made it apparent in their suggestions that the current Dissenter Law was outdated and inept. Therefore, they expressed that

not only has the old Dissenter Law proved wanting, as there are doubts and uncertainties about the law's application in the different cases, but it could also not be said of it that in all parts it satisfies the demand of freedom of religion and gives those Christian communities the rights that belong to them.⁶⁹

The council's determination did not mean that all of the discriminatory propensities of the law were to be rectified. There were still some deficiencies that maintained certain unequal treatments of dissenters such as the Baptists and Methodists. Yet, this was a step in the right direction. Their deliberation resulted in a revision of the Dissenter Law in 1891, replacing aspects of the original law of 1845.

⁶⁷ Norwegian Parliament Archive, Om Udfærdigelse af en lov angaaende dissentere, pp. 3-4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7

Conclusion

This article set out to illustrate the ways Norwegian Baptists expressed their conviction on religious liberty within the limitations of religious conformism in the late nineteenth century. The investigation began with an encapsulation of the historical context, reviewing the evolution of religious epochs in Norway and a synopsis highlighting how social, political and religious conventions in Norway often strived to subdue convictions. The article went on to describe how Baptists challenged these conventionalities by accentuating the paradox of the legal framework, particularly the Dissenter Law, which granted freedom upon the condition of subjugation. The focus of the discussion centred on the remarkable role and contributions of Baptists to address the limitations they encountered through their emphasis on the integral nature of the principle of religious freedom and their tenacity to persuade legislators to see beyond social and religious conventionalities. Consequently, Norwegian Baptists, in their discussion with the state officials regarding amendments in the Dissenter Law, focused on three main areas. They argued for respect of the individual's ability to choose their religious adherence without government interference, the imperative of the law to show equity towards all religious groups, and a partial disruption to Erastianism. In this regard, as part of their witness, Norwegian Baptists established themselves as prophets for freedom.

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